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Gettysburg the Way the Soldiers Saw It in 1863

Late in the afternoon on July 2, 1863, Union General Winfield Scott Hancock ordered the sacrificial charge of the 1st Minnesota Infantry in an effort to slow the advance of Confederate Brigadier General Cadmus Wilcox's Alabama Brigade at Gettysburg. The result of that legendary charge was the death of 215 men, leaving the 1st Minnesota with 82 percent of the regiment lost — the highest casualty rate of any unit in a single action in the Civil War.

In the years after the battle, the thicket where this deadly fighting took place grew into a wall of trees, creating an interpretive no man's land that few park rangers or battlefield guides could effectively decipher for visitors. The National Park Service wants battlefield visitors to see this ground the way the soldiers saw it in 1863 and has started a project to rehabilitate the Codori-Trostle thicket and other major battle action areas at Gettysburg National Military Park.

Battlefield rehabilitation is one of the major initiatives called for in Gettysburg's General Management Plan. The plan and environmental impact statement are the culmination of a multi-year planning process, during which the park held 50 public meetings and considered 4,375 written comments.

Battlefield rehabilitation will restore Gettysburg's historic integrity. The National Park Service recognizes that changes to the landscapes have occurred over time, including the growth of trees, changing field sizes, and missing fences, orchards, and farm lanes. These changes obscure the key terrain, avenues of approach, and fields of fire that affected the outcome of the battle. As a result, some portions of the battlefield have changed physically. They can no longer convey to people today what it was like for the men who fought there.

The park intends to restore as much as possible the historic terrain, fence lines, and viewsheds of the battlefield. The project will be phased over the next 15 years and will include the replacement of historic fence lines, orchards, and farm lanes as well as the return of grasslands, farmlands, and woodlands that played important roles in the battle.

Battlefield rehabilitation will also enhance visitor opportunities and understanding. Restoring the integrity of key battle areas will contribute to improved educational experiences and an overall greater understanding of the events as they unfolded July 1–3, 1863. It will allow visitors to understand the obstacles faced by those on the field as well as the command decisions made by both armies.

In order to do this, the staff at Gettysburg first had to understand the natural and topographic features that were crucial to the outcome of the battle. To determine the influence that various battlefield features had upon the fighting, we used the time-honored military methods of terrain analysis. Known today by the acronym, KOCOAA, this method analyzes:

- Key terrain
- Observation and fields of fire
- Cover and concealment
- Obstacles (both natural and man-made)
- Avenues of approach

The proposed museum and visitor center for Gettysburg National Military Park. Image courtesy The Gettysburg National Battlefield Museum Foundation.



The Trostle Lane, undergoing restoration. Photo by the author.

In order to understand how the generals organized the terrain for battle, the park is rehabilitating the major features of the battlefield — the pattern of open versus wooded land and the 1863 circulation systems. As a result, the public will be able to understand how these features influenced the tactical decisions made during the battle and how the troops moved into their battle positions. For example, the little knoll just off the park's Hancock Avenue, from which General Hancock observed the second day's battle and from which he desperately marshaled reinforcements to plug holes in the Union line, is difficult to understand today. Hancock had a clear view over the thicket from the knoll all the way out to Emmitsburg Road and as far south as the Peach Orchard. Today, a wall of trees has replaced the thicket, blocking this important sight line.

Smaller features such as fences, orchards, open woodlots, and buildings affected the movements of individual units and in many cases made the difference between life and death for individual soldiers. These missing, dilapidated, or damaged features will be repaired or replaced so that the visitor can clearly understand the terrain, obstacles, and avenues of approach that affected the soldiers during combat. For example, today's visitors to Gettysburg see an unbroken field of Pickett's Charge, but when fences and other obstacles that were there in 1863 are replaced, the difficulties and challenges facing those troops can be understood.

Another major goal of the project is that battlefield restoration will create a sustainable historic environment by improving wetlands, water quality, and wildlife habitat. A key point of understanding the Gettysburg battlefield, as it was almost a century and a half ago is the rehabilitation of the environment. Non-native species, hardwood stands, and changing agricultural landscapes have had a negative effect on the historic terrain.

By replacing grassland, restoring wetlands, replanting orchards, and removing non-historic timber stands the National Park Service can rehabilitate the historic assets of the battlefield. Use of phased rehabilitation plans and the enactment of



long-term maintenance priorities will provide effectively increased historic education and a sustainable environment.

Five actions will improve wetlands, water quality, and wildlife habitat over the next 10 – 15 years:

- Gradually removing field drains in agricultural areas to restore up to 100 acres of wetlands, benefiting plants and wildlife that live in these areas
- Fencing cattle from streams and wetlands to reduce soil compaction, erosion, excess nutrient loading, and ground cover loss, and improve water quality in the park and the Chesapeake Bay watershed
- Increasing grassland areas to expand habitat for grassland species like the Upland Sandpiper, Loggerhead Shrike, and others, many of which are State-listed species of special concern (Delaying the cutting of hay will allow ground-nesting birds such as the Bobolink to thrive.)
- Removing exotic plant species to provide opportunities for reestablishment of native plant species
- Partnering with local governments and conservation organizations to plant new trees in areas outside the park, where needed along stream banks and in other areas, as part of the Chesapeake Bay Initiative

In July 2001, the park initiated battlefield rehabilitation with a demonstration project at the Codori-Trostle thicket. Non-historic trees have been removed in two phases, shrubs have been replanted to reestablish the thicket. A third phase of non-historic tree removal will take place in the thicket once the shrubs have become established.

Codori-Trostle Thicket Rehab—The view from the Sickles Monument looking northwest before the second phase of the project in November 2001. Photo by the author.

Old trees scattered throughout the battlefield that were here in 1863, known as witness trees, will be protected and preserved by the park.

Rehabilitation of Cemetery Ridge

Gettysburg's General Management Plan also calls for a major partnership with the non-profit Gettysburg National Battlefield Museum Foundation for the fundraising, design, construction, and operation of a new museum and visitor center for the park. This will include removal of current visitor facilities and parking lots from the Union battle line at Cemetery Ridge where 34 Union regiments fought and over 900 soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured during the Battle of Gettysburg.

Additional goals of the museum are:

Protection of the park's collection of artifacts and archives. New facilities are needed to provide appropriate storage conditions, proper care, and display of the park's collections including 38,000 artifacts and 350,000 printed texts, historic photographs, and other archival documents.

Preservation of the Cyclorama painting. An appropriate gallery space will be provided to stop the continued deterioration of the largest and one of the most significant objects in the collection, a colossal painting measuring 26 feet by 370 feet, illustrating Pickett's Charge. The painting is designated a National Historic Object.

Provision of high-quality interpretation and educational opportunities for park visitors. New exhibits and broader interpretation will provide visitors with an understanding of the Gettysburg Campaign in the broad context of the Civil War and American history.

How The Partnership Works

The entire project carries a \$95 million price tag, which includes construction of the



building, design and installation of the museum exhibits, purchase of the 47-acre site for the new museum and visitor center (privately owned land, within the boundary of the park, that is close to, but not on the major battle action areas and is two-thirds of a mile from the current visitor center site), restoration of the historic Cyclorama painting, restoration of the area occupied by the current facilities to its historic appearance, necessary off site improvements, and a \$10 million endowment to help cover the maintenance costs of the new facility. The Foundation's fundraising campaign is now underway.

The facility would include museum exhibits, a Cyclorama gallery, the electric map, theater/classrooms, a public research center, a book and museum store, limited food service, a tour center for Licensed Battlefield Guide tours and other educational tours, and park and Foundation administrative offices.

The same view after non-historic trees were removed to bring the thicket back to its historic footprint. The Codori farm is visible in the distance. Photo by the author.

The park would probably have had to wait a lifetime to receive the Federal funding required to properly preserve our historic resources and provide the level of visitor services today's museum-goers expect. By joining with the Foundation in our first public-private partnership of this scope, we hope to set a new standard for park facilities. The Foundation will raise the funds to construct and build the new facility, and, after it opens, will run the visitor center in cooperation with the park. After 20 years, the Foundation will donate the land and the facilities to the National Park Service, debt-free.

The new museum will tell a coherent story of the Gettysburg campaign within the full context of the Civil War and American history through state-of-the-art exhibits that are designed to be interesting and engaging for children as well as adults. Mr. Robert Wilburn, former president and CEO of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, is the Foundation president and chief executive officer. A Museum Advisory Committee created by the Foundation includes

Gabor S. Boritt, Dr. Dwight Pitcaithley, Ms. Olivia Mahoney, Dr. Nina Silber, Dr. Eric Foner, Mr. Robin Reed, Dr. Gary W. Gallagher, and Dr. James M. McPherson. The Advisory Committee helped develop a storyline for the new museum.

The Foundation expects to break ground for the facility in early 2004, and to complete the project in early 2006. The current facilities will be demolished at that time and the historic landscape restoration will begin that same year.

More information on battlefield rehabilitation and the Gettysburg museum and visitor center project is available on the following Web sites:

- Gettysburg National Military Park – www.nps.gov/gett
- Friends of the National Parks at Gettysburg – www.friendsofgettysburg.org
- Gettysburg National Battlefield Museum Foundation – www.gettysburgfoundation.org

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On July 3, 2000, the 137th anniversary of Pickett's Charge which concluded the Battle of Gettysburg, smoke and clamor of a different sort began to fade from the battlefield as a crowd of 10,000 watched the National Park Service demolish the National Tower at Gettysburg. The privately owned and operated National Tower was built as a tourist attraction in the early 1970s. Preservationists made it the poster child of unwanted development near historic sites. USA Today called it "the ugliest commercial structure ever to intrude on the sanctity of a national park."

The demolition followed the Government's condemnation of the property through a Department of Justice declaration of taking. The National Park Service had authority to acquire

the property beginning in 1990 when it was added to the boundary of the park. Discussions with the property owners had been unsuccessful for years. In Fiscal Year 1999, Congress funded the acquisition, and the Justice Department filed for condemnation soon after.

The demolition of the tower marked the first dramatic step in the park's major effort to restore Gettysburg's battlefield landscapes.

Photo by Harry Waters, volunteer, Gettysburg National Military Park.

